

# KILLJOI.EXE//PROTOCOL/XERO

## Welcome In

It was 5 below in Tulsa. I didn't mind.

The cold made people quiet. I liked quiet.

The buildings in the Turley district sagged like they'd given up. Holosigns glitched out over vape ads and porn. Somewhere underground, a distorted bassline trembled like a heartbeat on drugs.

I moved slow. Shard humming in my spine.

At the checkpoint, the guards gave me a look — face tattoos, silent, dead-eyed — and waved me through. They didn't ask questions. I didn't offer answers.

At the center of the Turley stood a church coughing neon and snow. A melted sign flickered over the front:

ICE N9NE HQ – SADBOYZ ONLY

A guy stood under the light wearing a fur coat that looked like it came with trauma. He had aluminum grillz and bleached eyebrows. Eyes red from drugs.

He looked at me once, then smirked. "You're him?"

I didn't answer.

He nodded like I had. "Yeah. Rheddrum said you'd show up lookin' like a lyric that hurts to listen to. Said you had main character trauma face."

He turned and waved me after him. "C'mon, gothboy. You're gonna fit in just fine."

The elevator creaked and coughed on the way up. It smelled like vape juice, blood, and teenage heartbreak.

The guy lit a cig and leaned back. "You always this talkative?"

“Sure.”

He laughed to himself. “Yeah. Sadboi, certified.”

The rooftop was colder than death. A dozen Ice N9ne members stood in a loose circle, dressed like thrifted heartbreak and duct-taped eyeliner. Face piercings, katanas, eyes hollowed out by aesthetic.

In the middle, sitting on a broken vending machine throne, was Rheddrum.

Red mesh shirt. Black lipstick. Tears tattooed down both cheeks. Drinking something purple out of a mason jar.

He stood when he saw me.

“Damn,” he said. “You look like someone kicked a poetry book into a trauma ward.”

I didn’t say a word.

He smiled wider. “Alright. You know how it goes. New blood bleeds first. You pick someone. You cut or get cut.”

He pointed at a guy the size of a refrigerator in a mesh hoodie, licking sugar off a churro.

Didn’t matter.

I stepped forward.

Someone in the crowd laughed. “Bro’s choosing ChurroZack? That’s brave or suicidal.”

Another whispered, “Dude looks like a walking breakup song.”

I didn’t flinch.

Zack came at me swinging.

Big mistake.

I ducked, cracked my elbow into his throat, swept his legs, and slammed him down into the ice. Five seconds. No wasted motion.

I pressed my boot into his spine.

Then someone muttered, “Okay, damn.”

I stepped off. His churro rolled away into the snow like a fallen comrade.

Rheddrum laughed.

“Alright. Ice cold. I like that.”

He walked up and offered his hand. “Welcome to Ice N9ne. We cry hard, fight dirty, and never turn down a beat.”

I didn’t shake.

“Not here for clout,” I said. “I need access. Your data feeds. Surveillance. Net routes. Comms.”

Rheddrum tilted his head. “What for?”

“I’m looking for someone,” I said. “I need to find her.”

He stared at me for a moment. Then smiled.

“Tragic,” he said. “You’ll fit right in.”

I don’t think they cared really what i was doing here, I know they only wanted me around for my look, that’s how these guys are.

The bunk was barely a room.

It was the corner of a storage floor with a mattress thrown down on crates of expired stim packs. Fluorescent strips overhead buzzed like they were trying to say something in code. I didn’t unpack.

A poster of some underground rapper peeling off the wall. Graffiti that read “WE ALL WANNA DIE A LITTLE COOLER” in black marker across a steel beam. The air smelled like rust and sweat and too many emotions left to rot.

I sat on the bed. Didn’t take off my boots. Stared at the blank wall across from me and listened to the pipes overhead click like a metronome with PTSD.

A thought flickered in, came fast.

A laugh. Not mine. Higher-pitched. Warm.

My body went still.

Karyna.

Seven years old maybe.

Long Brown hair. Too big of a hoodie. Running barefoot through grass that wasn't dead. A river behind her. She turned around, smiling, shouting a name.

My name.

But she didn't say "Xero."

She said—

"Viktor!"

The memory hit like a gunshot inside my skull.

I stood up too fast. Breathing hard. Hands trembling. The bunk felt too small.

Outside, I could hear one of the Po\$\$e members screaming along to a synth-pop death ballad through the vents. Someone else was crying under auto-tune.

But inside my head it was still quiet.

I leaned against the metal wall.

That wasn't just any memory. That was her.

Karyna.

I remembered her. Not fully. Just a frame. A feeling.

A moment at the edge of a riverbank, before everything got ripped away.

The Ice N9ne Po\$\$e had one thing going for them — bandwidth.

Their data library was junky, chaotic, mostly used for tracking rival soundclouders and pirating hentai VR, but buried underneath it was real power.

And I knew how to dig.

I was in the Po\$\$e's Net Room by 3 AM.

It was a closet of flickering terminals strung together with bare wires and half-melted power strips. A guy named CryBaby was passed out drooling on his keyboard.

I stepped over him and jacked in.

Six screens.

I cracked the node that mirrored Tulsa's surveillance grid — a sloppy backdoor they'd installed into outdated city enforcement drones. Rheddrum used it to spy on rivals.

I used it for her.

I started with timestamps — last six months. Cross-referenced with black-market netfeeds and public crime logs. Then started adding filters:

Female.

Late teens to early twenties.

Belarusian descent.

Unregistered.

Living in Tulsa.

There were hundreds of false matches.

I narrowed the list down by one last filter: "Looney Goonz."

Suddenly... three hits.

Low-res footage. One camera view. An alley behind a ramen bar on 43rd.

She was there.

No doubt. Hair up. Hoodie too big. Laughing.

She looked dangerous.

She was beautiful.

She looked alive.

The name on the file said: GANG ACTIVITY: LOONEY GOONZ INCIDENT — LATE NIGHT FOOD TRUCK ROBBERY.

I stared at the frozen frame. My hand hovered over the pause key.

She was right there.

My chest tightened — like a screw twisting under the ribs.

I downloaded the footage. Every frame. Burned it to my phone's local memory.

She made it.

Karyna survived.

And now I knew where.

The next morning, Rheddrum was on the roof, high as god and shouting into a hairbrush he thought was a mic. A portable speaker behind him blasted a beat made of broken glass and anxiety.

“Luv me like a shadow clone, shoot me like ur mom do...”

I waited for the track to end.

He dropped the brush and turned.

“Yo, sad prince,” he said, grinning. “You got that look like your trauma folder just unzipped itself.”

Held out a flash drive.

“Found someone. I need more access.”

Rheddrum raised an eyebrow. Took the drive. Plugged it into a visor node hanging around his neck like jewelry. The footage played. Karyna. The food truck heist. Her laugh.

Rheddrum let out a low whistle. “She’s Looney Goonz?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s funny,” he said. “They jacked twenty grand in nug crates from DeathBite Division last month. Covered everything in glitter and left a sticker of a screaming raccoon. That them?”

“Yeah.”

Rheddrum sipped from a mason jar of something pink and glowing. “Alright. Let’s make it interesting.”

He gestured to the rooftop terminal. “Drop a track.”

I stared at him.

“I don’t rap.”

“Don’t matter. Everyone does up here. Prove you’re Ice.”

I sat at the console.

Didn't blink.

Pulled up a sample of sirens pitched down until they sounded like regrets. Added a bassline that shuddered like a cracked rib. Chopped up a gun reload sound.

Looped it.

Then rapped, monotone:

"Glocktopus, eight limbs, all heat.

Bleed on beat like a corpse with receipts.

I ain't got friends, I got enemies on leash.

Touch her name, that's your face on the street."

The beat cut out.

Silence.

Rheddrum slow-clapped.

"Okay. That was actually fire. Real 'trauma-core coldwave death-dad' vibes."

He tossed me a keycard.

"Access approved. Go find your girl. We gotta finish that Glocktopus track though."

Tulsa was louder at night.

Not just from sirens and people screaming for their lives, but from the way the city breathed — fast, sharp, like it expected to be stabbed again.

I moved quiet through Midtown. Neon signs blinked half-dead. Pavement wet from a coolant leak. Every sound made the shadows twitch.

I was one block from Cherry Street.

According to what I pulled from the Po\$\$e's feeds, the Looney Goonz had set up in what used to be a preschool — a place now known by street-level whispers as The House of Hoodlums.

Three-bedroom squat fortress.

Garage under. Chaos above.

I didn't approach the front.

I scoped the place from an alley with a busted vape machine and a mural of a cat with fangs.  
Watched the lights flicker behind the warped blinds.

Then I saw her.

Karyna.

Same walk. Same everything really. Talking to someone — a guy in a fur coat with a giant burrito and no pants.

She laughed. Threw a crumpled napkin at him.

It hit me like a needle under the skin: the sound of her voice.

She made it.

She was happy.

And I was a ghost watching from across the street.

Then the front door creaked open.

Another guy stepped out — huge, barefoot, sipping from a jug of something red. Looked right at me.

My pulse stopped.

But he didn't seem to care.

He turned, stared at a pigeon, and screamed, "I KNOW WHAT YOU DID!"

I backed up.

Fell into a trash bin.

It made a noise.

The sound traveled.

Karyna's head turned toward the alley — sharp, like a predator catching wind.

For a second, her eyes met mine through the dark.

I froze.

She squinted, curious. Like a memory just out of reach.



She looked back at the guy in the fur coat, then she looked back to me.

I was already gone.

I didn't sleep.

Back at the Po\$\$e HQ, I lay on the top bunk of a triple-stack in the concrete barracks, listening to someone freestyle sobbing over a glitchcore beat in the hall. The sound moved through the walls like steam.

My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

She looked right at me.

I told myself she didn't know.

She couldn't know.

But some part of her had to recognize me — the way her head tilted.

Still her.

I stared at the ceiling and counted each breath like it was the last one before war.

Across the room, one of the junior members — a guy with pink contacts and glitter in his wounds — stood up from his cot and said, "I think my soul's bleeding."

I didn't move.

I needed to see her again. But not like this. Not from the dark. Not like a glitch in her memory.

I needed her to remember.

That's when the door slammed open.

Rheddrum stood there shirtless, soaked in rain and blood, laughing.

"You good, sad boy?" he asked me, waving a splintered pipe.

"Fine," I said, sitting up.

"Good. 'Cause the DeathBite Division just tried to jack our stim stash."

He grinned.

“They shot Lil.Pixx13 in the foot. She’s fine — I think. Anyway, you and me? We’re gonna return the favor.”

I stood without thinking.

“Where?”

Rheddrum’s smile widened.

“Where else?” he said.

“Cherry Street.”

### **Close, But Ghost**

We pulled up in a stolen van with LED rims and a muffler that coughed like it had lung rot. Rheddrum was already out the door before we stopped moving, swinging a crowbar like it owed him money.

Cherry Street was quieter than usual.

Not still—just tense.

You could feel it in the air, that hum of something about to break.

“We’re not here to beef with the Goonz,” Rheddrum said, low. “Just wanna tag some turf, scare the rats.”

I stayed in the back.

Kept my hood low.

Watched from behind tinted shades as the Po\$\$e spread out.

One of the junior members spray-painted a sad face with a bleeding nose on the side of a dumpster. Another played one of our newer tracks on a portable speaker — a glitchy mess that sampled babies crying and police scanners.

Then I heard her voice.

Clear. Close.

Karyna.

Laughing at something from inside The House of Hoodlums.

I didn't move.

Didn't breathe.

Through the crack in the curtains, I saw her silhouette. Dancing with someone. The light behind her made her hair glow at the edges.

It hit me harder than gunfire.

She was real.

Still here.

Still beautiful.

Still alive without me.

"Xero!" Rheddrum called from up the street, holding a bottle full of fire.

"Wanna light it up?"

I shook my head once. "Nah."

He shrugged. "Your loss, antihero."

The others roared as he tossed it into a pile of junked scooters.

The explosion was more dramatic than it needed to be. Just sparks and smoke. No real damage.

I didn't look back.

We left without a fight.

No one from the Goonz came outside.

No one saw me.

But I saw her.

And that was enough to know the next move was mine.

I was back in the bunkroom before midnight.

The rest of the Po\$\$e were still out tagging med-clinics and threatening local synth-pop DJs. Rheddrum left me a can of turbo juice and a bottle of black nail polish on my cot — his version of a compliment.

I didn't touch either.

I jacked into the terminal beside my bed and loaded the footage again.

Same file.

Same loop.

Karyna.

Grainy footage from an alley camera. She was leaning against a crate, eating dumplings from a cracked container. Some other Goonz were with her — that guy with the ripped-up kimono, the one with the laptop always eating cereal, and the tall one who always looked like he just woke up from a concussion.

They laughed. Tossed empty bottles into a green neon-lit barrel.

Karyna flipped someone off mid-bite and smiled.

I paused the frame.

Zoomed in.

That smile.

It was chaos. It was home.

My hand drifted to the scar on the side of my neck — the one I got escaping Delphi. It ached sometimes, like a ghost trying to whisper. Tonight it screamed.

I rewound the video. Played it again.

And again.

There was a moment where she looked at the camera — right into it — and stuck out her tongue.

I wondered if she knew I was watching.

I wondered if she could feel it.

Like static under the skin.

Back when we were kids, we used to say that if we were ever lost from each other, we'd find our way back by remembering the sound of each other's laugh.

Hers still rang like a blade unsheathed.

And mine?

Mine was still buried.

But it was starting to claw its way out.

3:44 A.M.

The HQ was dead quiet except for a broken vending machine in the hall whispering "ERROR" every thirty seconds like a confession.

I cracked my knuckles.

Sat at Rheddrum's private terminal while he slept upside-down from a hammock, shirtless, covered in poetry tattoos he swore were "battle incantations."

He wouldn't notice if I burned the whole place down — as long as I left the aux cable untouched.

I jacked in.

No one questioned me anymore. I'd earned my keep—cold kills, clean jobs, no questions. And that gave me access to every surveillance port Ice N9ne had wormed into Tulsa's infrastructure.

Including one tagged:

KILLJOY.FREQUENCY

I opened the file tree.

Footage. Sound logs. Deep net pulls. Metadata cross-checks.

All tied to Looney Goonz movement across the city.

I started tracing the pings:

- Hardware store. Southside. Two months ago.
- Drive-thru ramen robbery. Last month.
- Glitter bomb attack on some executive gala. Last week.

There was a pattern.

They weren't just hitting places at random.

They were running interference. Each hit drew attention away from a different location.

The real move?

The Goonz were building something.

Or hiding something.

Either way—it meant Karyna had a purpose now. Something bigger than chaos. Something she was fighting for.

My chest tightened.

Back in Delphi, when we were thirteen, I saw her fight a grown man with a clipboard and a syringe. Busted his nose with her elbow and screamed, "I want to be a human, not a fucking folder!"

That fire hadn't gone out.

I scanned through audio logs until I found a shortwave radio snippet labeled:

GOONZCAST\_13

I hit play.

The speaker cracked with static, then a girl's voice filtered through—raspy, tired, half-laughing:

"This is Killjoy Frequency. If you're listening, either you're lost... or you're already one of us. Doesn't matter which. Just remember: don't follow the lights. Follow the noise."

My hand tightened on the mouse.

I didn't realize I was smiling until the screen dimmed.

She was leaving signals.

Not for me.

But I could still read them.

And I would follow every one.

Until I found her.

The target was an old municipal records vault built under a synthwater bottling plant. Real boring. Real ignored. The perfect kind of place the Goonz would hit when no one was looking.

Intel said they were after encrypted Verogon property deeds — blackmail material. I didn't care about the objective.

I cared about her.

Karyna.

I was already on-site.

Third floor of an adjacent building, lying prone in a nest of broken office chairs and cracked windows. Stole a sniper railgun from Ice N9ne's gun storage, the sniper was steady against the windowframe. I'd adjusted for wind and drift. I had eyes on the alley.

She arrived with the others, dressed head to boot in Gooncore: matte black jacket, neon pink holster, that same chaotic hair pulled back with a glitter clip that screamed "I stole this from a corpse or a toy store."

She was smiling.

Just like she used to when we snuck past security in Delphi to sit on the roof and count stars through the smog.

Then everything went sideways.

A scream from the alley.

A second faction — not Ice N9ne, not cops — burst out from behind the trash compactors.

Ambush.

One of them lunged toward her with a blade longer than my arm. Karyna ducked. Fast, but not fast enough.

I saw the angle of the swing.

She was about to get her throat slit.

I pulled the trigger.

PHZT—

The man's head exploded mid-swing.

Dropped like a bag of bricks.

Karyna spun, staring at his corpse, blinking at the red vapor mist drifting upward.

She turned to where the shot must've come from — but I was already crawling back, disappearing into the dark.

I heard her say it, barely picked up on the mic:

“What the f—”

One of the Goonz shouted, “Did his brain just EXIT his skull?!”

Karyna replied: “I think an angel just saved my ass. A really angry one.”

I smiled.

Didn't say a word.

Just packed up, melted back into the stairwell, and vanished.

I didn't go back to my bunk.

Too exposed.

Instead, I hid in the server room where the lights flickered red and blue from old neon tubes and the walls smelled like burnt plastic and vape oil.

I sat on the floor between two heat pumps and rewound the alley footage again.

Paused.

There she was.

Karyna.



Looking around for the shot.

Mouth slightly open. Hand still on her holster. Chest rising fast. A smear of blood across her cheek that wasn't hers.

She almost died.

My pulse hadn't come down since the trigger pull. Not because of guilt. Not because of adrenaline.

Because she didn't see me.

Because I was right there.

So close I could've whispered her name.

I leaned back against the coolant pipe, closed my eyes, and thought about Postavy.

About the river.

About that night at the fence, when we were thirteen.

The guards were closing in. She was coughing blood. I remember dragging her behind a crate, screaming that I wasn't going to leave her.

And I didn't.

I bought her time.

Took the shot to the spine.

Got dragged back into the lab.

She made it out.

Now here we were.

Eight years later.

Two ghosts in the same city.

And she didn't even know.

"Yo."

Rheddrum's voice from the doorway.

I opened my eyes.

He stepped in, holding a bag of nutrient mush and a blunt the size of a baby's arm.

"You missed the after-party," he said. "Cops showed up. Pixx13 stabbed one with a high heel. Classic."

"I was watching recon," I said.

"Still with that Goonz obsession?"

I didn't answer.

He squinted. "You planning something, emo Jesus?"

I met his eyes.

Flat. Honest.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm going to ghost them."

He laughed. "You?"

"Yeah."

"Better make it dramatic."

I stood.

Already knew what I had to do.

Next time, I wouldn't watch from the shadows.

I'd be close enough for her to hear my voice.

## **Echoes In The Drywall**

The House of Hoodlums sat slouched at the edge of Cherry Street like a drunk who'd forgotten what time was. A former preschool turned anarchist clubhouse, fenced in by old riot barricades and graffiti that mostly screamed "NO THANK YOU" or "STOP SHOOTING US."

It was empty tonight.

I'd tracked the Goonz chatter through open band signals and glitchy drones. They were on a job towards Sapulpa, something about the Voodoos.

That gave me an hour. Maybe less.

I scaled the back wall.

The alley reeked of engine oil and melted candy. Someone had stacked milk crates into a makeshift throne.

I slipped in through the busted vent cover that led into the garage.

The place still smelled like... noise. Cheap weed, battery acid, fried tofu, and someone's very recent body spray decision. I moved slow. Methodical.

Their "war room" was the prize.

A converted nap mat classroom lined with old holo-monitors, wires like veins, a beanbag with knife holes, and what looked like a shrine to a broken drone named "Kevin."

This was where their tech guy worked.

And where the heart of their crew pulsed.

I planted the bug — thin, circular, matte black — right under the desk where his monitor cables coiled. A whisper-sensitive microphone with compression uplink. Perfect for passively capturing every dumb plan they cooked up.

Then I paused.

There — on a shelf next to a cracked lava lamp — was a photo.

It was her.

Karyna wrapped in a pink hoodie way too big for her. Standing beside that cowboy guy and a dude who looked like he hadn't slept since 2050.

They looked... happy.

She was safe.

A slow breath cracked out of me. The kind that hurt.

She'd found something here. Found people. Chose to stay.

And I was just a shadow in the rafters, watching her life from inches away.

A sharp beep snapped me out of it — proximity warning.

They were back.

I bolted out through the side hallway, then out the back door as headlights curved around the corner.

Just as I slipped into the darkness, I heard her voice.

“Who left the back vent open again?! Ricardo, if this is another raccoon smuggling ring—”

I didn’t stay to listen.

I just vanished into the alley again, the mic already feeding into my wristband, a thread of her voice drifting through:

“...next time we do recon, I swear to god, we’re painting Michael’s abs just so they get caught on thermal.”

I smiled.

Then disappeared.

The first night, I didn’t sleep.

The mic worked better than expected.

I lay back in my bunk under the cracked ceiling of Ice N9ne HQ, one headphone in, the other loose. The Po\$\$e was arguing in the next room about whether or not a flamethrower counted as “subtle.”

I wasn’t listening to them.

I was listening to her.

“Cash, if you eat one more bag of bugles without washing your hands, I swear I will castrate you with Ricardo’s toenail clippers.”

That voice. That heat. The way she spit threats like poetry.

It was Karyna.

She was in the war room with the others. Cash was eating — again. Ricardo was doing something loudly involving glitter and a can of compressed air. Michael was humming the theme to some ancient cartoon.

Normal.

Ridiculous.

Comfortable.

I kept the volume low, just enough to make out the rhythm of her speech. The timing of her laugh. The sigh in her voice.

It didn't sound like strategy or logistics.

It sounded like family.

And I hated it.

Not because she had it.

But because I wasn't part of it.

Not yet.

Soon.

The next morning, Rheddrum tried to get me to roll with them to shake down a synth-drug chemist. I told him I had stomach trauma from spoiled street sushi.

Truth was, I didn't want to miss the war room banter.

That night, I heard something that stopped me cold.

Karyna's voice, low. Not joking.

"I had a dream last night," she said.

"You died."

Silence.

Ricardo asked, "Was I at least shirtless?"

I was lacing my boots.

Black-on-black tactical soles. Reinforced toes. The kind you could dance in or run like hell in, depending on how the night went.

I had one headphone in, looping the last track I'd made for DJ Killmeme's setlist — a remix of my own single, "Glocktopus," slowed to a heartbeat and drowned in echo.

Tonight wasn't about showing off.

It was about letting her see me.

Just once.

Before I left that place and faded again.

"You dressing up for someone, or just planning to cyber-strip in public?"

I didn't turn.

Rheddrum leaned against my doorway, chewing the stem of his sunglasses like it was a cigarette. His eyeliner was smudged. His hoodie said DEAD 4 LYFE in holo-chrome.

"You're coming with?" I asked flatly.

"Thought I might. DJ Killmeme owes me ten credits and a black eye."

"It's not a hit."

"Didn't say it was. But a good rave's like a war zone. Flashbangs and hormones. I want to be where the action is."

I didn't argue.

Too risky.

Too loud.

But Rheddrum was the kind of guy who could smell secrets. The more I pushed him out, the more curious he got. So I just nodded, slow.

"Fine. Don't cramp my route."

He grinned like a hyena that just learned to moonwalk.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Prince Static."

I slid the mask over my face, adjusted the fit.

Tucked the knife into my coat pocket.

And for a second — just one second — I closed my eyes and saw her again.

Seven years old. Laughing by the river.

Thirteen years old. Running, barefoot, heart screaming.

Now?

Now I just wanted her to know I kept my promise.

That I never stopped trying to find her.

The bass hit like a punch through honey.

Lights burned violet, then bone-white. Smoke machines blasted mist that smelled like bleach and lavender. The crowd moved like one beast — limbs tangled, heads back, sweat dripping under neon.

I didn't dance.

Not yet.

I watched.

From the edge of the storm.

Hidden behind the smoke vent scaffolding, one foot on a broken speaker, hood up, mask low. My eyes scanned the crowd like I was tracking heat signatures. Until I found her.

Karyna.

Her hair was in a bun. Tight pants, cropped jacket, boots. Her body moved like she was fighting gravity. Laughing. Letting herself forget. It hit me in the gut.

And then she turned — just a flick of motion.

She saw me.

No — felt me.

She didn't recognize my face, not like this. But I knew the second our eyes locked — deep in the strobe, shoulder to shoulder with the deadbeat rhythm of the warehouse pulse — that something ancient kicked in her chest.

She pulled a guy into the crowd — short, broad, bald, probably Kale — and vanished into the bodies.

I slipped my hoodie off.

And then I moved.

Through the chaos.

No mask now.

No smile.

Just motion.

Sharp. Focused. Fluid.

I didn't part the crowd — I became it.

Found her.

Right there.

Her back to me. Her hips locked into the beat, arms overhead. A shimmer of sweat on her neck catching the lasers like coded light. She didn't see me approach. But I felt her flinch — not in fear, in recognition.

She turned around and seen me, she looked at me like she was taking my aura in, or at least that's what I hope.

I didn't speak.

Didn't touch.

I just moved with her.

One step behind.

Then beside.

Then around — a slow orbit, letting our rhythms sync. I saw her eyes shift sideways. Saw her lips part, slightly. She didn't stop. Didn't ask.

She mirrored me.

Like instinct.

Like breathing.

Like something so long buried it didn't know it had survived.

We didn't touch.

Didn't dare.

Just movement. Clean and raw. Like a fight choreographed into a fever dream.



Every motion we made was a memory with its name scraped off.

She wasn't seducing me.

I wasn't trying to be cool.

We were just—

there.

Together.

For the first time in eight years.

And she didn't know.

Not yet.

But her soul did.

When our shoulders brushed, the noise of the warehouse cut to a high, aching hum. Her face flushed. My pulse felt like static. I couldn't talk to her here, the movement, the noise, needed to isolate her.

"Bathroom?"

It wasn't a question.

She nodded once.

We didn't speak.

Didn't look back.

The stall was cracked open, covered in graffiti, reeked of paint and regret. One light flickered overhead, buzzing like it wanted to confess.

The door slammed behind us.

No words.

She pressed me back. Her mouth on mine. Fierce. Blind. Like a desperate prayer.

I tried to ask if 'Zero' or 'Viktor' were familiar names to her but she cut me off by kissing me.

My hand gripped the back of her neck.

Her fingers found the hem of my shirt, pulled it up. I caught her wrist, held it for a breath, then let go.

We didn't fully undress.

We just collided.

Sharp.

Ugly in the right ways.

Our mouths bruised.

Our teeth clicked.

We moved like ghosts breaking back into bodies.

I bit her shoulder.

Not hard — but just enough.

Enough to feel something that wasn't silence.

When it ended, she leaned against the wall. Breathing rough. Hair sticking to her cheek. I licked the blood off her shoulder to look kinky, because honestly this is really my first sexual experience, I probably looked somewhat goofy.

"You don't smile much," I said.

I looked at her like she'd forgotten who I was.

Maybe she had.

"I don't pretend well," she murmured.

She didn't ask my name, so I asked if she wanted it.

"No."

That kind of brought my mood down, not gonna lie.

I was nervous, sort of burned and replied "Good."

I walked out the bathroom.

On my way out, on the bathroom wall, someone had scrawled:

"EVERYONE YOU LOVE WILL FORGET YOU"

I laughed once.

The hallway out of the bathroom was warm. Smelled like neon sweat and spilled synthvodka. My shirt stuck to my spine. My jaw ached where she'd kissed me too hard.

I didn't look back.

Didn't let myself.

By the time I climbed the scaffold stairs to the catwalk, the floor below had swallowed her again. Just another pulse in the riot.

Up in the booth, Rheddrum was slouched in a half-broken hoverchair, legs on the console, vape smoke coiling around his purple tinted shades. An open pill bottle rattled next to his foot.

"Yo," he muttered, not looking. "Took you long enough. You get laid or stabbed?"

I didn't answer.

I stepped to the glass.

Below, the warehouse pulsed. Bodies slammed. Lights convulsed. Somewhere in the middle, I spotted her again.

Karyna.

Moving like the beat came from inside her chest.

I didn't blink.

"Who you eyeballin'?" Rheddrum asked, straightening slightly. "You been locked on that girl since we got here."

I reached into my back pocket. Pulled out the cracked polaroid I kept sealed in plastic.

Held it out.

The old photo was a little faded. Two kids — barefoot in the grass beside the Myadelka River. Her braids crooked. My nose bloody. We were smiling like we didn't know what a lab was.

Rheddrum squinted.

Then looked down at the girl in the crowd again.

"You serious?" he said, voice dipping into something rare. Not mockery. Curiosity.

I nodded once.

“That’s who I’ve been looking for.”

He didn’t speak for a moment. Just watched the girl. Then me.

Then laughed, slow and low. “Bro... you a goddamn ghost story.”

I didn’t smile.

Didn’t move.

I just slipped the photo back into my pocket and said, “I need out.”

Rheddrum took a long drag, exhaled it through his nose. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s bounce. This scene smells like regret and cheap silicone.”

He stood.

We left through the catwalk exit, cutting across the scaffolding to the alley stair.

I didn’t say anything else.

But inside, I was burning.

She was real.

She was alive.

And I’d touched her.

Now all I had to do—

was make her remember.

The rail car hummed like a distant scream on mute.

City lights blurred by the windows — pinks, reds, neon sickness bleeding into static blue.

Rheddrum sat across from me, head bobbing to a track only he could hear through his wired earbuds. His fingers tapped his thigh like a twitch he couldn’t kill.

I stared at the floor.

Boots planted.

Heart echoing like a drum in a coffin.

I still tasted her.

Lavender sweat. Cigarette breath. Whatever that sour neon candy was on her tongue.

Her voice hadn't changed.

Her body had.

And I knew her in a way the world never would.

She didn't recognize me yet.

But I'd fix that.

Back in the hideout — Ice N9ne's repurposed parlor on 41st — I didn't go to my bunk. I pulled out the worn metal case from my locker, set it on the table in the dark, and clicked it open.

Inside:

- The shard knife. Dried blood still under the hilt.
- My old project uniform ID chip, deactivated.
- A holoband — cracked but flickering. The last thing she gave me.

And the photo. Always the photo.

I held it up to the cold light of the flickering overhead bulb. Our faces. Thirteen. Grinning. Bruised.

Alive.

Karyna Ilyinichna Vladislav.

The one person who made me feel human.

I grabbed a blank tag from the bench, slotted it into my old neural pad, and keyed in a new data sigil — a memory trigger. The same scent profile as the bleach-lavender aerosol used in the rave bathroom. Old conditioning scent. Maybe it would jog something.

Then I opened a private line to the Looney Goonz's netstream.

Encrypted. Masked.

Just to listen.

Kale's voice came through first. Cash. That weasel Trent. And then—

Her.

I didn't record it.

Didn't need to.

I just listened.

Laid back in the metal chair. One hand behind my head. One hand curled around the blade.

Eyes closed.

Her laugh echoed inside me like it belonged there.

This time—

I wouldn't lose her.

Not again.

## **Shadow**

The rail car hummed like a distant scream on mute.

City lights blurred by the windows — pinks, reds, neon sickness bleeding into static blue.

Rheddrum sat across from me, head bobbing to a track only he could hear through his wired earbuds. His fingers tapped his thigh like a twitch he couldn't kill.

I stared at the floor.

Boots planted.

I almost can not believe what happened back there.

Heart echoing like a drum in a coffin.

I still tasted her.

Lavender sweat. Whatever that sour neon candy was on her tongue.

Her voice hadn't changed really.

Her body had.

And I knew her in a way the world never would.

She didn't recognize me yet.

But I'd fix that.

Back in the hideout — Ice Nine's repurposed parlor on 41st — I didn't go to my bunk. I pulled out the worn metal case from my locker, set it on the table in the dark, and clicked it open.

Inside:

- The shard knife. Dried blood still under the hilt.
- A holoband — cracked but flickering. The last thing she gave me.

And the photo. Always the photo.

I held it up to the cold light of the flickering overhead bulb. Our faces. Twelve. Grinning. Bruised.

Alive.

Karyna Ilyinichna Vladislav.

The one person who made me feel human.

Then I opened a private line to the Looney Goonz's netstream.

Encrypted. Masked.

Just to listen.

Kale's voice came through first. Cash. That weasel Trent. And then—

Her.

I didn't record it.

Didn't need to.

I just listened.

Laid back in the metal chair. One hand behind my head. One hand curled around the blade.

Eyes closed.

Her laugh echoed inside me like it belonged there.

This time—

I wouldn't lose her.

Not again.

I packed light.

Everything I had fit in a reinforced backpack and a leg holster—some credits, a backup shard knife, burner pads, two neural jacks, a faded photo from Postavy, a cracked canister of Karyna's old lip balm she left in my jacket at thirteen, still faintly cherry-scented, and one EMP puck.

That one was for the van.

Rheddrum's ride was parked out back behind Cryo Unit 3, between a rusted power box and the cold drop chute. He loved that van—matte black with bone decals, armored tires, underglow like bad intentions, and a bass system that could level a synapse if it got too close to your cerebellum.

I left the EMP puck under the driver's seat.

Timer set to go off twenty minutes after I was gone.

Enough to melt the core.

But not enough to kill anyone. I ain't like them.

Then I left a splatter of my own blood—shard-cut across the palm—smeared it inside the windshield with three fingers.

R3APER WUZ HERE.

[Gone.]

Let 'em think I burned out.

Po\$\$e never trusted quiet exits. So I made mine loud.



Now?

Now I'm sleeping in an abandoned train car outside the old Overpass 44 track, tucked near the Tulsa edge ruins. No power. Just flickering blue from a salvaged lantern rigged to an old vape cell.

Rats don't even bother me here.

It's quiet.

For now.

But tomorrow—

I make contact.

With her.

There she was.

Ten meters away.

Half-shrouded in a vent's shadow, peeking from behind an antenna array.

Gun drawn. Eyes hard. Still moved like a storm that hadn't figured out where to hit yet.

Karyna.

The breath left me so fast I forgot to breathe again.

I didn't blink.

Didn't dare.

The police precinct's back corridor buzzed underfoot—infrared scanners pinging the Looney Goonz's ghost-ware as they breached through the lobby. I stayed tucked under the fire escape. My heart beat so loud, I was sure she could hear it from the roof.

"She's here. She's really here."

She stopped mid-movement.

Tensed.

Turned.

Her eyes swept the alley once.

Then locked.

On me.

I didn't wave.

Didn't nod.

I just stared, like I had the first time—like I'd never stopped.

I saw her speak into her mic.

Something clipped and official.

But I could read her lips through the scope:

“Be back in a sec.”

She vanished.

I already knew where she'd go.

The metal door at the alley's far end hissed open.

She stepped through it like a memory unpaused.

No helmet now. No mask. Just her.

Hair tied up. Cheek smudged with ash.

Pulse flaring in her throat like the past screaming for acknowledgement.

She didn't speak.

Not yet.

Neither did I.

She stepped forward once.

Then again.

Then: “You've been following me.”

My voice surprised me. Low. Calm.

“Only when you want me to.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“I don’t need to,” I said. “You came anyway.”

I saw it hit her. Like static between ribs.

She hated it.

She loved it.

I felt both reactions like echoes in my skin.

“You have answers,” she said.

“Sure,” I replied. “You’re just always asking the wrong questions.”

She was two meters away now.

I could see the sheen of sweat on her collarbone.

The nick at the edge of her brow.

Every inch was familiar.

“Talk,” she said. “Or I’ll use you like a stress toy again.”

I smiled, even though it hurt.

“You think you’re using me?”

One step closer.

Another.

Then she shoved me.

Hard.

My boots scraped the gravel, but I didn’t fall.

“Say something real,” she whispered. “Tell me who you are.”

I leaned in.

Close enough to smell the lavender-bleach mist in her hair from the rave last week.

"You already know."

She shook her head. "I don't know shit."

"You know my name," I said, quieter now.

A second passed.

Then her lips moved like the word pulled itself out of her.

"...Xero."

It hit harder than any gunshot.

She said it like she'd been saying it her whole life.

I didn't thank her.

I just kissed her.

Hard.

It wasn't soft.

It wasn't careful.

It was gravity.

We stumbled sideways into the shadows behind the dumpster, hands searching like panic, mouths crashing like history rewriting itself.

She tasted like sugar and defiance.

Her nails scraped my spine through my hoodie.

My breath hitched.

Her fingers curled into my waistband like a dare.

We didn't talk.

We didn't ask.

We didn't need to.

Her shard hummed under my hand when I brushed her back.

Mine answered.

They remembered us, even when we hadn't.

Then—just before it ended—

She stared at me.

Really stared.

Like she knew.

And maybe—

just maybe—

she didn't want to.

I felt it crack through her like guilt wrapped in heat.

I pulled her close again anyway.

Couldn't help it.

Couldn't stop.

When we pulled apart, I wiped blood from her lip.

She adjusted her shirt, not looking at me.

I said it before she could bolt:

“See you soon, Kar.”

She froze.

Her head tilted.

“I didn't tell you my name.”

I didn't answer.

Didn't need to.

I was already walking.

And I didn't look back.

## **The River Was Ours**

The summer light in Postavy always looked like something painted, too golden to be real, too still to last.

I sat barefoot on the bridge rail, legs swinging, watching the river Myadelka twitch in little silver threads beneath us. It smelled like moss and diesel and warm rocks, and I didn't mind. It was the kind of quiet that made everything else feel pretend.

Karyna crouched at the bank below, muddy to the ankles, holding a long stick like it was a legendary weapon.

"Tell me when it floats!" she yelled up.

"It's floating," I lied.

She squinted up at me. "Liar."

I smiled.

She grinned wider.

"Gotta do better than that, Viktor!" she shouted. "I'm not dumb."

She was the only one who called me by my first name. Nobody else even tried.

I slid down from the rail and ran to the side slope, slipping a little in the grass until I landed next to her, almost toppling into the mud.

"You're gonna fall one of these days," she said.

"I'll land on you."

"Gross," she said, but not like she meant it.

We sat there for a while, side by side, watching the stick drift. It caught in a clump of algae. Karyna poked it free.

The quiet got bigger between us.

Then—

She asked it again.

“Do you think they’ll really take us to the city?”

I didn’t look at her. “Probably.”

“They said we’re special.”

“They say lots of things.”

Karyna was quiet. Then: “You don’t believe them?”

I shrugged. “I believe you.”

She didn’t answer for a second.

Then she leaned her head against my shoulder.

We stayed that way.

Breathing the same air.

Not thinking about the city.

Not thinking about the lab.

Not thinking about what “special” meant.

Just two dirty kids on the edge of a river, pretending the world wasn’t already changing.

And for a moment—

It wasn’t.

It was always cold in our house, even in summer.

Mama said it kept the spirits out. I didn’t ask what kind.

Karyna never seemed to mind.

She sat beside me on the lumpy old couch, legs curled up, clutching a pillow that was too big for her. Her hair was still wet from the river, and she smelled like grass and old lakewater and that weird cherry soap she liked.

The TV flickered in the dark.

We weren't even watching something good—some dubbed-over American action movie, bad sync, worse effects. Explosions every few seconds. A guy with a fake beard screamed about vengeance in broken Russian.

But Karyna was laughing.

That tiny, hiccupy laugh she did when something caught her off guard. Like her ribs didn't know how to hold joy all the way in.

I wasn't watching the movie anymore.

I was watching her.

She noticed.

"What?" she asked, mouth still halfway into a smile.

"Nothing."

"You're staring."

"You laugh weird."

She threw a pillow at my face. "YOU laugh weird."

"I don't laugh."

"I know," she said softly. "That's why it's weird."

I pulled the pillow off my face and chucked it back at her. She caught it with both hands, triumphant, and then flopped sideways to smother herself under it like she'd just won something.

The movie exploded again.

"Do you think they'll let us still watch movies?" she asked.

"Who?"

"The people. From the labs."

I paused. Then said, "Maybe."

"What if they make us do homework every day?"

"I'll blow them up."

She snorted.



“Promise?” she asked.

“Promise,” I said.

I didn’t know then that I wouldn’t be able to keep that promise.

But I wanted to.

God, I wanted to.

The movie kept playing. But I didn’t really notice the end.

She fell asleep on my shoulder before the credits rolled.

I didn’t move for an hour.

The lights in the dormitory buzzed even when they were off.

The hum always crawled behind my eyes, like it wanted in. I hated it.

But tonight, we’d carved out a corner of silence—me and Karyna, side by side under the bunk she wasn’t supposed to be in, the blanket thrown over us like it was a fortress.

My notebook was open between us, pages filled with sketches and floorplans. Maps of the lab’s lower maintenance tunnels. Guard rotations. Timing gaps.

The plan was almost finished.

“We’ll go next week,” I whispered.

Karyna’s eyes flicked to mine, fast. She was nervous, but not scared.

“You sure?”

I nodded. “That’s when the backup generators run the longest. Lights go dim. Cameras glitch. It’s now or never.”

She stared at the map again. Her fingers hovered over it like she wanted to touch freedom.

Then—

“What’ll we do?” she asked. “After.”

I blinked.

"Like... what comes next?" she pressed. "Where do we go?"

"I don't care," I said. "Just away. As far as we can."

"That's not a plan, Viktor."

"It's a dream," I said. "We get out. We find a place. Somewhere that smells like trees. We make up fake names. I'll be a guy who reads poetry and cooks terrible food. You can be—"

"A warlord," she said quickly, smiling.

I laughed. "Obviously."

She bumped my shoulder with hers. "We could start over."

"Yeah."

"No needles. No testing. No buzz in the walls."

I nodded. "Just us."

We got quiet again.

The kind of quiet that's too full to be empty.

Karyna looked at me, really looked.

"Would you marry me?" she asked, sudden and soft.

I froze.

She didn't blink.

"If we escape," she added quickly, like it made it less crazy. "If we make it. Would you... want to?"

I swallowed.

Her face was lit by the emergency strip lights from under the bed. Pale blue across her cheekbones. A little scar under her eye from the last blood draw that went wrong.

I stared at her like I already knew.

"I'd want to," I said.

She smiled.

The kind of smile you only use once, and never again.

"I'd want to too," she whispered.

Then she rested her head against my chest.

I didn't sleep.

I just counted the hours between now and next week.

I didn't think I'd sleep.

The maps were memorized. The keys were stolen. The guards were bribed with the promise of nothing. Every second from lights-out to sunrise was accounted for.

But I couldn't stop pacing the inside of my skull.

What if the door codes changed?

What if the sedatives don't kick in?

What if Karyna doesn't show?

That one hit hardest.

Then I heard the knock.

Not on the wall.

On the metal bunk frame.

Three soft taps.

I slid up the blanket and there she was—barefoot, hair pulled back, wearing one of my old test-unit shirts like it was armor.

"You can't sleep either?" she whispered.

I shook my head and moved over.

She crawled in beside me like it wasn't the first time.

It wasn't.

But tonight felt different.

Like this was the last time the world would be quiet.

We laid there for a minute, just... listening to the hum. The air vents. The slow breath of a dozen kids dreaming behind locked doors.

Karyna's hand found mine under the blanket.

"I was thinking," she whispered.

"That's dangerous."

She smiled but didn't laugh.

"I was thinking," she said again, "even if something goes wrong tomorrow—if I get caught—don't come back for me."

I turned to her, fast.

"No."

"You have to promise."

"No," I said again, louder this time. "You don't get to say that."

"I'm serious, Viktor."

"So am I."

She looked at me like she was trying to memorize the lines in my face.

"You're so stupid sometimes," she whispered.

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know."

Then she kissed me.

Not like a kid.

Not like someone practicing.

She kissed me like a question she didn't want answered.

I didn't move at first.

Then I did.

Then I didn't stop.

I think the world could've ended right there—between our mouths, between our breath—and we would've missed it.

When she pulled back, her forehead rested against mine.

"I'm glad it's you," she said.

She looked so peaceful, happy, tears started forming and rolled down.

"I'd follow you to hell and back, Kar, even through death, I'll see you in the echo, sweetheart, you're all I have, all I care for, love you Kar."

We didn't say anything else.

We fell asleep like that—

curled up, knotted in silence, like two escape plans waiting to run.

The door code worked.

That was the last thing that went right.

We slipped through the security corridor like vapor—bare feet, adrenaline breath, hearts on overdrive. I had the stolen keycard. She had the map.

I gripped her hand like it was oxygen.

She didn't let go.

One hall. Then another.

Cameras blinded with silver spraypaint.

Then—

"Subject breach—Lab 7 corridor!"

The alarm was pure electricity down my spine.

We ran.

Footsteps behind us.

Guards. White armor. Black visors.

I shoved her through the stairwell first. Slammed the door behind us. Bolted it with a stolen rifle.

“Don’t stop running.”

She didn’t.

We made it to the sublevel elevators.

The backup tunnel system was only a minute out.

The first guard came through the side door. I shot him. Twice.

Bullet to the throat. Then another one just to be sure.

The second wasn’t so lucky.

He grabbed Karyna by the wrist.

I ripped a fire extinguisher off the wall and shattered it over his face until he let go.

Blood sprayed across the hallway like paint.

She screamed.

“I’m okay,” she gasped.

“You’re not,” I said, dragging her behind me, “but we’ll fix that later.”

More shouts.

Red lights strobing.

We hit the tunnel.

Half the lights were flickering—just bare pipes, dripping heat, and our footfalls echoing like thunder.

Then it happened.

Behind me—

A thwip.

Not a bullet.

A pellet.

Karyna collapsed.

“KARYNA—!”

She hit the ground hard, eyes wide and glassy, lips twitching.

I turned just in time to see the doctor with the memory wipe rifle duck behind a valve stack.

I pulled my knife.

I didn’t think.

I didn’t feel.

I found him by scent—chemical antiseptic and fear—and drove the blade into his throat before he could reload.

He choked out something.

I twisted. Hard.

He didn’t finish his sentence.

I dropped him. Rushed back to her.

“Karyna—hey—look at me.”

She blinked, confused.

Her mouth opened like she wanted to speak, but nothing came out.

“I got you,” I whispered, lifting her into my arms. “I got you, I got you—”

Then—

Something slammed into my back.

Like a thousand volts wrapped in lead.

I dropped to one knee.

More guards.

One with a baton.

Another with an electro-round rifle.

Everything in my body seized.

I tried to hold onto her.

Tried to say anything else—

But I only got one word out.

“Run!!”

They dragged me backward down the hall.

She stumbled forward.

I saw her face—blank.

Then scared.

Then gone.

I don't remember how long I was locked away.

Weeks bled into months.

No windows.

No clocks.

Just pain.

Needles in the neck.

Electrodes on the skull.

White lights like knives in my brain.

Every test ended with me screaming and every scream ended in silence.

They wanted to see what the V27 shard would do to a mind already broken.

I gave them answers.

And when they let their guard down—just once—I gave them something else.

The guard who brought food had lazy eyes. Got too close.



Sloppy.

I took his tray.

Then his knife.

Stabbed straight through his neck.

The lights shut down in my cell six minutes later.

but I was already gone by then.

I killed five men in the west corridor.

Two were scientists. I didn't care.

One begged. I didn't stop.

The elevators were locked, so I climbed the ventilation shaft.

My hands bled from the grating.

My muscles burned.

I didn't care.

I dropped into Lab 2 just as a tech was prepping sedatives.

Dragged the blade across her eyes.

They hit the sirens.

I was already in Sublevel 2.

By the time I reached the weapons locker, my knuckles were raw.

My jaw—bruised.

My eyes—black-ringed from weeks of insomnia and restraint drugs.

But I was alive.

I found an old guard uniform.

Too big.

Didn't matter.

I took an SMG and enough ammo to make my point.

Project Delphi had ten exit protocols in the case of a breach.

I knew them all.

I surfaced a half-mile on the edge of Tulsa

Naked. Bleeding. Covered in soot and red.

I didn't stop walking.

She got out. She made it. I know it.

And I'll find her. I'll burn the world if I have to.

She haunts everything.

Not like a ghost.

More like a thread.

Wound into every thought I can't finish.

Karyna.

She's older now—I know that.

Stronger, too.

But when I see her, I still see the girl in the rust-colored hoodie with a mouth full of sunflower seeds and a heartbeat that calmed mine.

I remember her laugh.

Short. Real. Like something you had to earn.

The way she looked at me like I was something other than a mistake.

That girl is gone now.

Replaced by a legend.

A glitch in the system that made her.

But I wonder...

Does she remember?

Not just the lab.

Not just the escape.

But me.

The way I held her the night before.

The way she said yes when I asked, "Would you marry me if we ever got out?"

I don't believe in fate.

But I believe in her.

When I see her now—even from across a crowd, even through the scope of a rifle—I feel it.

She's still mine.

Even if she doesn't know it yet.

I've crossed bloodlines, burned alliances, rewritten my life ten times over just to get within fifty meters of her again.

I don't want to scare her.

I don't want to take anything away from her.

I just want one thing:

To stand in front of her,

look her in the eyes,

and say:

"I never stopped looking."

## Party

I'd seen the flier.

Encrypted. Buried in a throwaway data stream like they didn't want anyone outside their circle to find it.

But I wasn't just anyone.

Not anymore.

It was an in-group thing.

Looney Goonz-only.

No allies. No invites. Just chaos in celebration form.

I debated it.

Longer than I should've.

Would it be weird? Would I even be let in?

But there was a whisper in the back of my head—something old, primal, unreasonably hopeful.

If I was ever going to step out of the static and into her light, this was the time.

So I went.

The House of Hoodlums looked like it had survived the apocalypse, then hosted a kid's birthday party on the ruins.

Lights strung from dead trees. Speakers humming broken basslines.

I waited.

Watched from the alley, just past the floodlight's reach.

Then circled around, slipped through the side gate.

The yard was alive.

Kale mid-suplex on Ricardo.

Michael shouting commentary like a drunken sportscaster.

Cash narrating into a GoPro taped to a beer can.

Trent... trying to backflip onto a trampoline and landing somewhere near a garden hose and a minor concussion.

I didn't look for her immediately.

I didn't need to.

She came outside.

Through the kitchen door.

Hair messy. Eyes glassy. Laugh like a gunshot in velvet.

She saw me.

I didn't move.

Just leaned against the wall, arms crossed, still as myth.

She walked toward me like it wasn't real.

"Are you stalking me?" she said, arms crossed.

I shrugged. "You're loud."

"You're creepy."

"Yet here I am. And here you are."

Her stare could cut tungsten.

The smart thing would've been to disappear again.

So obviously, she said, "Come inside."

I blinked. "You're inviting me in?"

"I'm drunk, stupid, and about to watch a grown man get suplexed into a kiddie pool full of jello."

"...Tempting."

"You'll fit right in."

So I followed her in.

God help me.

The crowd swallowed me like I was a dare.

Ricardo danced around with a rubber snake and one sock.

Cash sprayed beer on a raccoon and called it art.

Michael shouted something about quantum elbows.

Then Trent spotted me.

“WE GOT A LATE ENTRANT!” he bellowed. “Ladies, gents, and champions of the death pit—welcome... THE DARK INK DEVOURER.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

Ricardo stumbled over. “New guy looks like he DJs dubstep at a cemetery.”

Cash squinted. “Or like someone who asks for a separate spoon for his feelings.”

Michael muttered, “How come every guy Kar brings home looks like they’ve been photoshopped by depression?”

“I’m standing right here,” Karyna said.

“We know,” they said in unison.

Kale hadn’t noticed yet.

Too busy body-slamming Ricardo into a chair and yelling “THIS IS FOR BEING BORN.”

I stood still as the noise closed around me.

Unmoving.

Unsmiling.

Waiting for something I couldn’t name.

Then Trent pointed. “This man’s tattoos can see into your future! He once made a barista cry just by existing!”

“Facts,” Karyna whispered.

Then Kale saw me.

The way his grip tightened on the chair said everything.

But he didn't attack.

Didn't scream.

He just turned and walked inside.

I exhaled. "That one's fun."

"You have no idea," She said.

Someone screamed, "I'M BLEEDING SPARKLES!"

Another yelled, "BLEED FOR THE BRAND, BABY!"

But I wasn't watching them.

I was watching her.

And she knew.

She walked over, sipping a can labeled "WRESTLE-FUEL: DEATHBERRY."

"Having fun?"

"I'm impressed none of you are dead yet."

"That's our brand."

She looked at me—not like a stranger.

Like something half-remembered.

"Why do you keep showing up?" she asked.

I didn't lie.

"I miss you."

Her face tensed.

"...We don't know each other."

"Don't we?"

She flinched. Static in her shoulders.

"Don't do that," she said. "Don't play the 'maybe you forgot me' card."

I didn't smirk.

Didn't flirt.

Just said it:

"You used to hum when you were scared. Not a song. Just a noise. You thought no one noticed."

She froze.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Fair."

She walked away.

I didn't follow.

Inside, chaos reigned.

Kale yelling about betrayal.

Ricardo trying to bite a raccoon.

Trent face-down in neon nacho sludge.

But I wasn't watching any of it.

I was watching the door she walked through.

Because even now, even buried under a thousand moments and memories—

She was still mine.

Even if she didn't remember yet.